CHRISTMAS CHAOS
Luke 2:15-21
December 30, 1984

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One of the books that I have found most stimulating in 1984 is Henri Nouwen's Gracias! A Latin American Journal. I have shared insights from the book before, quoted from it, and privately have continued to be provoked, stimulated and agitated by it. Actually, it is a modest looking diary, written in small, manageable, segments. Nouwen is a Dutch priest, teaching at Yale, who visited and worked in Latin America for awhile. Gracias! is his journal from that period of time.

The stimulation and provocation come in this innocent-looking little volume from Nouwen's ability to place the theological claims of the Gospel squarely in the midst of life without equivocation, apology or without softening the claims. He simply sets them down in the middle of contemporary life. Now it is one thing to do theology in one's head, reading or listening to a lecture. It is another thing altogether to try to do it with one's life. It's one thing to meditate on the meaning of Jesus' assertion that he had come to "set at liberty those who are oppressed." It's another matter altogether to look around for some oppressed people and set about actually to free them.

Nouwen insists that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is relevant in the midst of life's ambiguities...even life's chaos. The entry for January 6, 1982 tells about a visit to the capitol of Peru at the end of the Christmas season:

"Today Don, Claude, and I did some sightseeing in downtown Lima. One of the churches we saw was the Jesuit Church of San Pedro. A talkative Jesuit brother told us about the busy life of the parish...While we were standing there talking people kept entering and leaving the church. It was clear that at this time of year the main attraction was not the confessional but the Nativity scenes, built in one of the side chapels. It was quite a sight. Not only was there the manger with the child and his parents, but around it were landscapes with hills, rivers, waterfalls, and bridges. There were little village scenes with women washing their clothes in the river. There were large herds of sheep and llamas. There were houses in which the lights were going on and off. There were medieval castles and humble straw dwelling places. It was not surprising that many parents took their children there to see the Christmas event laid out in miniature in front of them. But this was not all. In front of a house in which the Angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was going to become the Mother of God was an American police car, with a policewoman keeping an eye on Mary's house. 'We put the car there five years ago,' the Jesuit brother explained. 'It gives a little touch of modern life...' It seemed, however, that the police car and the policewoman had not been enough to give the Christmas scene a contemporary flavor. This year a jet plane had been added to fly in circles above the Christmas landscape. By some ingenious mechanism the plane was able to come low and then pull up again, sometimes coming quite close to the shepherds and the Magi, but never close enough to create an accident. 'Some people feel that that plane is a little much,' the brother said, 'but others like it a lot. It is part of our time.'" (Gracias!, Henri Nouwen, pp. 101-2)

It reminded me of an incident that occurred at our own breakfast table one time and was one of the more eloquent articulations of the meaning of the incarnation. A four-year old and I were assembling a cardboard nativity scene. You know, the ones "cut along the dotted line; fold between A and B; insert C in D; and then attach ABCD to EFGH." We had a kitchen table strewn with half assembled cows and sheep, a shed that wouldn't stand up, the holy family toppling all over one another, and a manger that resembled a miniature sliding board. Exasperated, finally, the four-year old asked, "Daddy, where's God in this mess?"

For those who have heard that one before, I apologize, but it does present the issue of the incarnation rather pointedly, I think, and that is the issue for those with the stamina to return to church on the Sunday after Christmas. Where is God in this mess? Where is God in all the noise and confusion and chaos of the season? Where is God in the mess the world is in?

There is something about the Christmas story, when it is classically told, that is too easily distorted. It is so very easy to romanticize the shepherds and to conclude that they were strong, quiet, but profoundly religious people. They were not. They were the equivalent of parking lot attendants. It is easy, likewise, to romanticize the scene of the birth...cattle lowing and sweet smelling hay. I slept one time in a room above several cows, and I can tell you that the odor was strong enough that I had difficulty sleeping and it wasn't sweet. The tendency throughout is to divorce this story from the realities of life, and in the process to make it into something it isn't - a soft, nebulous, spiritual, mystical experience.

The point of this sermon is very simple: It is that the birth of Jesus Christ happened in the midst of ordinary life, that it was not so serene and quiet as it was earthy, and noisy, and chaotic even. Those shepherds were a motley bunch. When they came to call on the holy family I can't imagine that the encounter was polite and restrained. In fact, I imagine them boisterous - and instead of "little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes" - I imagine a lusty howl, which is, in a sense, even more beautiful music, and dogs barking, and cattle and sheep objecting, and Mary annoyed. And out on the hillside, a multitude of heavenly hosts joined the announcing angel to praise God and I can't believe that Luke wanted us to imagine that it was pianissimo. And the Magi and the entourage. It doesn't say there were only three of them anywhere - that's a song writer's myth. There could have been a dozen, thirty - each with several attendants and many camels. I'll bet it wasn't at all quiet when they arrived.

Something important about Christianity gets lost when we allow the Christmas story to become too serene. Something about the Gospel's relevance to live is lost when religion is too other-worldly, too quiet, too private.

Frederick Buechner, as usual, said it wonderfully: "There should be interruptions in sermons: the sound of a baby crying, a toilet being flushed, something to remind us of what this flesh is the word became...When the host is being raised before the altar to the tinkling of bells it is very meek and right if not his bounden duty for the custodian to walk through with the vacuum cleaner." (A Room Called Remember, p. 82)

There is a lot of noise, frantic activity, chaos generated by an American Christmas on top of the enormous amount of noise, frantic activity and chaos generated by our way of life. At this point we long for a little quiet, a little privacy, a bit of reflective time and space in which to ponder the true meaning of the birth and I wish that for you today. I would suggest, however, that at least part of the true meaning is that the birth of Jesus happened in the midst of life at its most human, and that the creative love of God keeps being born in the midst of life at its most human which means at its most chaotic.

The Gospel is the source of hope and strength precisely because it begins and ends with the noisy chaotic reality of humanity. The barn wasn't serene: it was real; the crowds of people who pressed in on him, pushing their children at him, reaching out to touch him, were not orderly. And the passion...the entry to the city, the cleansing of the temple, the arrest, the crowds at the palace, the crucifixion - it was noisy, chaotic and very human business. That means that even in chaos we can count on this Lord, this power, this love. It means that when it begins again Wednesday morning with pressure from all sides, telephones ringing, demands and expectations of others weighing us down, the clock ticking and time running out - in life at its most hectic and chaotic, there is a God who loves us, and who is with us, and who wills our health and well-being and happiness. That is good news, this day, and every day of the year.

And now unto the God who is able to keep you from falling, be all glory and majesty, now and forever. Amen.

The L. Shines in the Darkness

December 24, 1984

We come here to listen to a story we have already heard. We come to hear about people we know from years of listening, because the story touches something deep inside us. We come to hear a story that says, in metaphor and music and drama, the best we know how to say about ourselves. We listen and a world which, by and large, is skeptical and sometimes cynical and always discriminating about what it will risk hearing, stops to listen too, almost as if it can't help but hear.

We listen and a Chorus is there, a multitude of voices clamoring to be heard.

There is a voice out of a distant past, reminding each of us that ancestors we never knew heard this story exactly as we hear it, and celebrated it with customs someone before them created, and adding a little of themselves, handed it on so that what we do has been done for generation upon generation.

And if that is the melody the melody line, harmony is added with a voice out of a relatively recent personal history, reminding us of the times and places when the story was first told to us, and the ways it began, early in our lives, to take particular shape in our consciousness.. The shading here is individual, and the traditions which form are the ones we are still remembering and rehearsing and shaping with our own preferences and handing on to others.

Mixed in are voices from a culture which always wants to appropriate the story as its own, and at its best does so with exquisite beauty: standing in cold intersections so that children will have coats and gloves, working late into the night so that hungry people

5,000 miles away won't die; giving, donating, volunteering, extending the fragile gift of common humanity. And at its worst, somehow turning the sublime and simple beauty of it into vulgarity.

Our book itself does not speak in monotone nor with simple voice. Angels, Zechariah and Elizabeth, young Mary & Josept, shepherds and heavenly hosts, magi and innkeeper, Herod and his council + each tells a part; each sees it differently; each helps us to hear its suurprising shades and nuances.

We come to listen to a story we have heard before because there is something about the story that contains the best news we have ever heard. And over all the voices clamoring to be heard there is one more: higher than the rest. Clearer, cold as a December night... like a choir boy, someone noted...singing an obligato of such beauty that ~~it~~ somehow manages to bring all the other voices together into profound harmony.

"In the begining was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. In the Word was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

But there is something about the story that is incomplete until we hear this voice. For ultimately the story is about darkness and light, life and love. ~~Ultimately we listen, I believe, because the more we hear it, the more we know that we must move from shepherds and mangers, to life and light and darkness.~~

We know how the story concludes, but the confrontation of darkness and and light, death and life in the world; the arena in which we must do our

living, is not at all resolved. We know that the baby was born in the dark, and that darkness has always been a meaningful image of the shadowy side of our history, our world, ourselves.

We sit up on the edge of our seats every year to listen to this story because each of us has known the meaning of darkness

-the relentless ~~source~~ power of injsttice in the world

-the threat of war

-the obstinate refusal of human beings to be human

We listen carefully because in our own lives we have stood in darkness and wondered about the meaning of it all and the possibilities and if there is any reason for hope.

We ~~have known~~ know the reality of darkness; when dreams fade and love wanes; when routine and sameness crowd out ~~the~~ joy, when boredom ends ~~the~~ laughter. We know the darkness of separation and grief and loneliness.

And so we come to listen to a story we know and its high, crystal obligato . . . .

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

We come because every time we hear we dare more to believe that there is a light shining; that there is no darkness in which that light cannot shine.

It is not bright. It is oblique, angled, like the late afternoon light in December. It is not fragile, it is vulnerable. The love of God which is what this light means, never coerces. The love of God, which is like a light, offers itself and will dispell whatever darkness into ~~whatever darkness~~ which we, its recipients, choose to ~~live by~~ honor it.

We listen carefully because this voice, this high, clear word is life, and hope, and love, and laughter.

In the darkness the light shines. In the darkness of night, Jesus Christ was born.